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ABSTRACT

Through the use of WORDSWORTH II, the faculty at Michigan Technological University have found that computer-assisted instruction can be useful in teaching students the processes involved in revision. A series of computer programs, WORDSWORTH II is available outside of and in addition to regular classroom instruction and offers students effective revision heuristics that they can apply at various stages of their rethinking and rewriting efforts. WORDSWORTH II was designed as a series of seven modules, each covering a specific kind of writing assignment found in freshman composition classes: narration, classification, personal writing, evaluation, description, creative writing, and persuasion. Each of the seven modules uses a similar format composed of two parts: planning and polishing. The planning program of each module reviews the major lecture points associated with the assignment and involves students in prewriting strategies such as brainstorming, focusing topics, organizing plot lines, and constructing audience profiles. The polishing program of each module--divided into early, middle, or late draft branches--involves students in revising their papers. In addition to helping students see revision as a multistep, multistrategy process best carried out over several successive drafts of a paper, WORDSWORTH II teaches students how to give priority to larger concerns of aim and audience when they write early drafts; how to examine problems of focus, development, and arrangement in middle drafts; and how to work with concerns of style and surface structure only in later drafts. (HOD)

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Beyond Bandaids and Bactine:

Computer-Assisted Instruction and Revision

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There was a time, not too long ago, when English teachers were known for their red pens. They gave assignments, waited a week , and then sat down to highlight in crimson the obvious errors of spelling, logic, and punctuation in the papers students gave them. Not much time was spent thinking about writing as a process. Revision mostly consisted of having students do "corrections." We have changed with the times. For most English teachers, the whole idea of composition, including revision, has undergone a radical alteration in the last ten years. The recent explosion of research on the processes involved in composing (Emig, 1971; Sommers, 1978; Perl, 1979; Pianko, 1979;) has had an impact on the teaching of writing wherever it occurs in the English curriculum. Our increased awareness of process has influenced not only the way we teach composition but the way we teach any classes that involve writing. The result has been an increased workload for all of us. We have found that it takes much longer to work with a student through lengthy prewriting activities and multiple drafts of a paper than it does simply to examine a written product in its final form. We have also realized that having students make superficial changes in their papers just doesn't help them become better writers. Now we ask for substantial revisions-- rethinkings of papers, ideas, concepts. We tell students that it is not enough to use Bandaids and Bactine when their papers require major surgery.

At Michigan Technological University, we believe that we have found in computer-assisted instruction (CAI) a powerful ally in our efforts to teach those important processes involved in revision. We have spent the last year developing WORDSWORTH II, a series of computer programs that helps us guide students through the revision of their own papers. WORDSWORTH II, which is available outside of and in addition to regular classroom instruction, offers

students effective revision heuristics that they can apply at various stages of their rethinking and rewriting efforts. Unlike most computer-assisted instruction offered to us by the software vendors who have begun to frequent our conventions, WORDSWORTH II makes students think of revision as more than a quick glance at surface problems involving spelling, grammar, or punctuation. Rather, it shows them that revision itself is a process and introduces them to a number of techniques that they can employ as they move through this process.

Overview

When we began our work on WORDSWORTH II our primary concern was with providing students a series of heuristics that they could employ in writing and rewriting the papers they were assigned in their freshman English classes. We quickly recognized, however, that writing and revising a descriptive paper would involve strategies that were radically different from those required in writing and revising a classification paper. For this reason, we designed WORDSWORTH II as a series of seven modules, each covering a specific kind of writing assignment found in freshman composition classes: narration, classification, personal writing, evaluation, description, creative writing, and persuasion. We also made sure that WORDSWORTH II was highly interactive, individualized, and helpful throughout the entire writing process--from prewriting through revising. WORDSWORTH II addresses students by name; offers reviews of pertinent material from classes; and, because it can branch to various subprograms, it meets students at their level of understanding.

Each of the seven WORDSWORTH II modules uses a similar format composed of two parts: PLANNING and POLISHING. The PLANNING program of each module, after reviewing for students the major lecture points associated with the

assignment, involves them in strategies they can employ before they begin to write a paper, i.e., brainstorming, focusing topics through short journal entries or freewrites, organizing plot lines, and constructing audience profiles. The POLISHING program of each module—divided into EARLY, MIDDLE, or LATE draft branches—involves students in revising their papers.

At this time, we have completed the prototype module of WORDSWORTH II—the program on writing narrative papers—and are ready to begin field-testing in a variety of colleges and universities across the country. The remaining modules are scheduled to go into production during the summer and fall of 1983.

WORDSWORTH II and Revision

If we have learned anything about revision from the research completed during the last ten years, we have learned that it is a "messy" activity, that it includes a variety of rethinking, reorganizing, replanning, rewriting, refining, rereading, and editing strategies (Sommers, 1978; Flowers and Hayes, 1979). We have also learned that many of our students don't seem to have a large repertoire of such strategies at their disposal and that many don't know when to use those strategies they have mastered (Selfe, 1983).

One of our main objectives in writing the WORDSWORTH II programs has been to get students to see revision as a multi-step, multi-strategy process best carried out over several successive drafts of a paper. WORDSWORTH II teaches students how to give priority to larger concerns of aim and audience when they write early drafts; how to examine problems of focus, development, and arrangement in middle drafts; and how to work with concerns of style and surface structure only in later drafts. Of course, the specific nature of

these considerations changes with each kind of paper a student is asked to write, so that WORDSWORTH II offers students differing strategies of arrangement for narrative papers, persuasive papers, descriptive papers, etc.

Because the programs are used outside of regular classroom time, students who come into our Language Skills Laboratory to use WORDSWORTH II can choose the assignment (PERSUASION, DESCRIPTION, EVALUATION, etc.) and the revision program most appropriate to the draft (EARLY, MIDDLE, or LATE) on which they are currently working. Table 1 illustrates the various topics covered in the three drafting programs of our NARRATIVE prototype:

Early Draft

—Identifying aim & purpose
—Identifying audience
—Identifying focus
—Considering organization
—Eliminating deadwood
—Defining major strengths
—Defining major weaknesses

Middle Draft

—Working with organization
—Showing vs. telling
—Focusing on a theme
—Creating effective openers
—Writing dialogue

Late Draft

—Considering transitions
—Employing vivid verbs
—Punctuating dialog
—Checking spelling

Each of these points represents a branching program capable of offering students help at a number of levels.

The following example, which comes from the revision program of the Narration module, illustrates how WORDSWORTH II approaches the multiple

drafting concept with a student named Judith.

> Hello from Silicon Valley, Judith! Yes, you've gotten my program that offers you help with revising your narrative.
>
> Okay. Let's see if we can't revise a draft of your narrative. I'm sure you know now that I believe in writing multiple drafts of a paper. As far as composition experts know, this "multiple draft" method helps you improve your paper each time you write. It gives you plenty of chances to think about what you're saying and how you're approaching that topic you're writing about. A friend of mine and an expert in this composing business, Dr. Maxine Hairston, has always believed in multiple drafts. She points out what John Kenneth Galbraith says about drafts, ". . . all first drafts are deeply flawed by the need to combine composition and thought. Each later draft is less so."
>
> So let's look at the draft you have completed. I need to know which kind of draft it is before I can help you. Follow the directions below to give me a hand:
>
> > Type EARLY if it's your first draft.
> > Type MIDDLE if it's your second or third.
> > Type LATER if it's close to being your final draft.

From this initial "menu" of revision choices, WORDSWORTH II goes on to provide more specific help on each kind of draft. When students bring early drafts to the computer, the program encourages them to focus on the larger issues involved in rethinking and reworking their papers. In the following example, for instance, the student is guided though one of the strategies for the revision of an early draft:

> Now, Judith, I'm going to ask you to sit back and be a critical reader of your own paper. Try to forget your close connections with the topic, your emotional investment in telling a personal story. You know sometimes it helps to get an expert or a knowledgeable friend to help you by reading your paper. Often they can give you a new perspective or viewpoint that you can't find on your own. But, ultimately <u>you</u> are responsible for your own paper, and what I want to do is teach you how to look at your work critically, as if you are a stranger to yourself and your narrative. Okay, Judith, read your paper and type in "finished" when you are done.

Judith rereads her paper and types in "finished."

The success of your narrative, Judith, will depend on how your audience likes it. Before you can estimate this, however, you need to identify who will read your paper. First, consider the following questions about audience:

1. Who will read this narrative?
2. Do I have more than one audience? If so, how would I describe each one?
3. What do I know about the interests, educational levels or backgrounds of my audience(s)?
4. In what parts of my narrative will my audience be most interested? least interested?
5. Why would my audience(s) want to read this story? What does it offer them? What does it tell them?

Now that you know the kinds of things I'm focusing on, let's see what you have to say about your paper! I will type each of the questions I just asked you, and I want you to write a short paragraph in answer. Remember, the questions refer to the narrative you've just written.

Before we begin, Judith, you should probably know that answering questions like these often makes you want to alter your original story or tell an entirely different one. If you find this to be the case, just type in "FREEWRITE," and I'll ask you to jot down some ideas about your new story.

The previous example also illustrates our efforts to use WORDSWORTH II as a vehicle for getting students to write. We know, both as teachers and experienced writers ourselves, that we have to practice various strategies of composing if we hope to make them ours and that only through constant use can we master techniques, knowing when and how to use them. It was for this reason that we built into our CAI as much writing practice as possible. WORDSWORTH II cannot, of course, "read" what students have written, nor can it judge the quality of their prose. It can, however, force students to practice the different writing and revising heuristics that will help them make substantial and meaningful alterations and additions to their drafts.

The students that we have invited into the Language Skills Laboratory to help us field-test WORDSWORTH II find its multiple draft approach easily adaptable to their own composing rhythms and styles. Most students approach the revision programs sequentially; that is, they bring an early draft to the program, receive some assistance and go off again to work at their own pace and in their own composing environment on their assignments. After they have refined an initial version of their paper, they return to the computer with a draft better than their original, but still not ready for peer-group editing sessions or grading by their teacher.

At this point, our students generally find themselves ready for the MIDDLE draft section of the revising program. In the NARRATIVE module, this section offers the student help with organizing material, showing instead of telling, developing compelling introductions, and writing effective dialogue. The following excerpt from the MIDDLE draft portion of our NARRATIVE module illustrates how we use WORDSWORTH II to get at the sometimes difficult concepts that students need to consider as they're reworking their initial writing efforts. This example also gives some indication of how we use the branching capabilities of the computer to allow students varying levels of instruction depending on their skill levels and their needs as writers.

> You know, Judith, if your readers get bored with the opening narrative, they may never make it to the end of your story. Examine the two samples below:
>
> 1. Denise went out for her first deer hunt. It was a chilly, grey afternoon in late November. About 3:00 she saw a deer. She knew she had to pull the trigger. Her index finger, stiff with waiting and cold, was numb against the small curved piece of metal.
>
> 2. She knew she had to pull the trigger, but her index finger, stiff with the waiting and the cold on this grey November afternoon, was numb against the small

curved piece of metal. Denise was about to kill her first deer.

Now which of these openings is better? Which would make the average person read on? When I prompt you, answer by pressing 1 or 2 and then explaining your choice in a short paragraph.

Which paragraph has the better introduction?

Why do you think so?

Judith types "#1. We get to know the main character's name right away, and we know she's out on her first deer hunt. She sounds just like Nadine, a friend of mine in Traverse City."

Actually, Judith, the second opening is probably the better of the two according to your teacher, and I agree. The first opening bores me with inaction. You'll notice that nothing actually happens until the third sentence. The second opening puts us immediately in the middle of the action. Do you need some more practice?

What our short excerpt cannot show is that WORDSWORTH II continues to branch on this particular topic. If Judith had tried another practice activity and failed, she would have been offered still another chance before WORDSWORTH II would have recommended that she see her teacher and ask for some "human help." If Judith had typed in the correct answer, "#2," in the first place, she would have been congratulated ("Right!") and would have been sent on to an activity that asked her to examine the introduction of her own narrative through a series of questions.

After students review those writing issues raised in the MIDDLE draft section and engage in a variety of short practice activities that help them to focus their topics and develop the concepts in their drafts, they can go off once again and work on their papers until their drafts are sufficiently improved for them to return and use the FINAL draft section. This section of the NARRATIVE module does many of the things conventionally considered revision; that is, it helps students with spelling, style, grammar,

transitions, and the use of active rather than passive constructions. And yet, even though we have used WORDSWORTH II to address the traditional concerns of revision that students might have in their last drafts, we have tried hard to make it more than an expensive electronic workbook. The example below illustrates how the FINAL draft section deals with the use of transitions without resorting strictly to multiple choice drills:

> You know, Judith, one of the tricks to writing a good narrative involves the use of signposts or transitions. In narratives, signposts are often words or phrases that lead a reader through the story and clarify the passage of time. Signposts commonly used in narratives include the following:
>
> | | | |
> |---|---|---|
> | after | then | first |
> | next | in a minute | later |
> | before | several years ago | in the meantime |
> | when I returned | by that time | soon afterward |
> | immediately | from then on | presently |
> | at last | meanwhile | |
>
> Do you need a little practice in recognizing signposts ? If you do, type Y for yes. If not, type N for no.
>
> Judith types Y.
>
> In the paragraph below I have underlined the first signposts. Read the paragraph carefully to yourself and then type in the rest of the signposts in the spaces I've provided:
>
> When Donna could stand it no longer, she squirmed out of the firefighter's grasp and ran into the blazing building. Minutes later she stumbled through the doorway clutching a slightly charred piece of paper in both hands. "My history term project," she whispered as she smiled weakly, "it's due tomorrow." Then, emitting a low moan, she fainted. It was not until two days later that she awoke in St. Edward's Hospital.

Depending on how well Judith did on her finding signposts in the example above, the computer would either ask her to identify and discuss the transitions in her own narrative or provide additional exercises on which she could practice.

Throughout the revision process, the computer has monitored Judith's progress, encouraged her to write, revise, and rethink her work as necessary. It even offers her help in the proofreading of the final draft she will turn in to her teacher. After her hard work, it sends her on her way with a bit of encouragement and patiently awaits the next student in need of assistance in the revision process:

> Well, Judith. You've spent some time on this draft! I hope I've been of help. Come back when you have another kind of paper due, and we can look at some other techniques. Ciao!

Conclusion

WORDSWORTH II is a powerful tool for helping students deal with the major revisions teachers are beginning to demand from them. The computer is patient and willing to go over the same points again and again. Because it allows students to change their minds about a paper, generate new ideas and think up examples—and gives them a printed copy when they are finished—it makes it possible for students to re-see and re-think their work so that they can be more sucessful in their revisions. Importantly, students also find working with this program fun. (As one of the students who helped us field-test the program said, "It was almost as much fun as a video game!") Finally, because WORDSWORTH II keeps track of what students write, they find it isn't as painful for them to generate new and substantial changes when they're called for.

Significantly, WORDSWORTH II is also a powerful ally for teachers. It helps remove some of the burden of reading papers and giving individualized help at each stage of the writing process and allows us to have extra time for those activities such as conferencing that no computer program can handle.

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